



ACSC Quick-Look

Catalyst for Air & Space Power Research Dialogue



The Role of the US Military in Free and Fair Elections

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Discussion. Throughout its history, the US has been interested in the promotion of democratization, and at various points that has included the objective of defining the terms of and then defending the preparation and maintenance of free and fair elections. Beginning especially with US support of democratization in the Western hemisphere during the latter half of the nineteenth century, American support for projecting democracy abroad expanded under President Woodrow Wilson. The 1915 US intervention into Haiti is particularly instructive. The US military was used first to quell the insurgency and then to stabilize the country and prepare for “free and fair” elections, which were a moderate success. The end game, however, was American withdrawal from Haiti in 1930 as the country descended again into violence. The lack of democratic tradition, the “taint” of the government as being too pro-American, the perpetual poor state of the Haitian economy, and eventually the loss of American public interest for democratizing Haiti, doomed the American occupation in the end.¹

By the end of the Second World War, American support for democratization was expressed in two important ways. On the one hand, it was promoted via US support for standing up the UN, The World Bank and other international institutions, whose missions were many, but included the support for democratization, establishment of market economies, and the eradication of colonization as an ordering principle in international affairs. On the other hand, the US sometimes acted unilaterally to try and effect democratization as it had done earlier in Haiti. Japan is a good and successful example of a unilateral US effort to stabilize, then democratize a country. The differences between the Japanese success and Haitian failure were many. First, Japan was completely defeated country where regime change was expected and insurgency had limited opportunity to hamper fair and free elections. It was also a highly industrialized country before US occupation. Therefore, growing the norms for fair and free elections in a nascent Japanese democracy that existed on a solid economic foundation and with a literate public was easier than in the case of Haiti. Haiti’s economy was a failure before and after US occupation; widespread public education did not result from occupation; and the opportunities for insurgency in Haiti was never erased. Therefore, it was easier to set up fair and free elections in Japan and help institutionalize the norms of democracy in Japan over time than it was in Haiti.

As the Cold War emerged, however, US support for democratization assumed a secondary role to containing the Soviet Union. Thus in the 1960s, Kennedy’s Latin American democratization program called Alliance for Progress was eventually stymied by US suspicion of left of center populist movements.

Implications for Current Operations. Since the end of the Cold War, the US military has increasingly been called on to defend democratization around the world, including humanitarian aid through peace ops, and to defend and ensure “free and fair” elections in countries experiencing internal conflict. Instructively, it has performed these functions most often in multilateral frameworks. The UN and NATO have been the international institutions through which the US military has regularly acted to perform democratization objectives. In Haiti, the US revisited earlier attempts to stabilize the country while attempting to set and defend the conditions for free and fair elections. One of the biggest differences between the 1994 and the 1915 interventions involved the role played by international organizations. While the US military led the way in 1994 (especially in the training of the Haitian military and police forces) and was still largely responsible for establishing stability and preparing for democratization, the UN assumed responsibility after a year. Operation Uphold Democracy started in September 1994 with the deployment of the US-led Multinational Force. The operation ended officially in March 1995. The role of the US military was then replaced by the United Nations Mission in Haiti (UNMIH),

¹ For a good synopsis of the Haitian intervention, see Ivan Musicant, *The Banana Wars: A History of United States Military Intervention in Latin America From the Spanish-American War to the Invasion of Panama* (New York: MacMillan, 1990).

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which included a large contingent of US troops (USFORHAITI) and a US commander until 1996. Haiti continues to suffer from internal instability and elections still shrouded with doubts.

In similar fashion, the US intervened with NATO into Bosnia after the Dayton Peace Accords to establish stability and set the stage for free and fair elections. The NATO-led international stabilization force (SFOR) maintained a heavy presence, promising to take “firm action” against those who would try to disrupt the vote. The Bosnia operation was seen as successful compared to Haiti. NATO worked alongside other international organizations, like the UN, the EU, the OSCE and numerous IGOs to enforce stability and ensure the free and fair elections could take place. Bosnian elections have increasingly received passing marks by observers in terms of their fairness. NATO troops and the other IGOs and NGOs worked to prevent intimidation practices by one group against others, to ensure safe voting at the polls, to provide safe transit of voters to the polls, and to transfer votes safely to counting houses. The military and other organizations also made abundant use of the media and information sources to encourage elites and the public in promoting a free and fair election turnout.

Bosnia, and less so Haiti, revealed important advantages for the US in intervening as part of a multilateral effort to stabilize a country and prepare it for fair and free elections. First, maintaining domestic public support in the US over time was easier, therefore allowing the US military and allied organizations more time to stay in the targeted country to assist in growing democracy. Second, the overall cost to the US was reduced. Third, the range of competencies in performing the needed tasks for ensuring fair and free elections was greater. The military was used as one component part of the many tasks performed to ensure democratic practices and outcomes. Finally, public perception in the target country toward establishing free and fair elections was more easily won in Bosnia as democracy was not seen as being unilaterally imposed.

Lessons to be taken away from past practices in using the military to ensure fair and free elections can be summarized as follow: Intense training for domestic law and order competencies must precede elections; Information regarding the election and promoting fair and free practices must be distributed (air drops would serve large areas quicker); voters must be physically protected in going to polling places and casting their votes; the votes themselves must be protected (votes must be protected from fraud and manipulation once cast); coercion of voters *prior* to the casting of their votes must be denied (have targeted populations been denied the right to vote through unfair standards applied to them in registering to vote, or through intimidation/threats made prior to voting experience?).

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